



Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs

Tony Evers, Governor | Mary M. Kolar, Secretary

December 9, 2020

The Honorable Bryan Steil
1408 Longworth House office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Steil:

We share your concern for the members who reside in Wisconsin's Veterans Homes. I would further welcome a constructive conversation focusing on how we can work together toward a common goal of best caring for Wisconsin's veterans.

While the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) provides aid and advice, the Wisconsin Veterans Homes are primarily regulated as any other nursing home in the state – licensed by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) and subject to all regulations of the state and the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

The staff in all our Veterans Homes are dedicated to providing top-quality care to the Veterans and spouses we are charged with serving. Our Veterans Homes, prepared with protocols, policies, and training to fight infectious diseases, were swift to address COVID-19 in March. Due to our immediate implementation of additional COVID-19-specific protocols and practices recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Wisconsin DHS, and CMS, and thanks to the tremendous work of the employees at our Homes, we were able to keep the coronavirus out of our Union Grove Home until August.

Wisconsin continues to see surges across the state while efforts to promote a statewide mitigation strategy have been impeded. Yet, many nursing homes across the state and nation – including veterans homes in other states – were unable to prevent the virus from entering their facilities as we did for so many months. Our staff is to be commended.

Throughout the pandemic our homes have provided regular updates to members and their families, which we also make publicly available on our website (www.WisVetsHomesCovid.com). Through May, the Union Grove Veterans Home remained free of COVID-19 until a single staff member reported a positive test on May 24. Two months later Union Grove reported the positive test of a contracted employee. Still, no members had yet contracted the virus. It was not until August that members tested positive for the disease, which can remain undetected in asymptomatic individuals.

From the beginning of the pandemic we worked in consultation with USDVA, CMS, and DHS, receiving and implementing advice and recommendations. WDVA's administrator for Veterans Homes maintained regular communication with staff from the USDVA Veterans Health Administration through the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) that serve Wisconsin. This included general communications about the support that could be provided by USDVA should need arise within Wisconsin's veterans homes. At the time of the May communications you reference, we did not require staffing assistance from the USDVA as we were successfully keeping the virus at bay. However, WDVA staff utilized USDVA's consultation services – discussions focusing on strategies for responding to a potential outbreak among members, efficient use of personnel protective equipment (PPE), and testing of staff and members.

During this pandemic, as with any large-scale emergency, requests for assistance within the state are coordinated through the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC). The veterans homes have made several supply requests to the SEOC to ensure each maintained an available stock, receiving over 528,000 individual items ranging from containers of sanitizer to gloves to gowns to N95 masks.

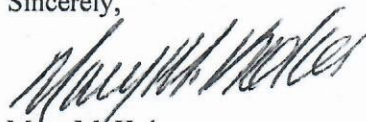
As community spread and COVID-19 cases in the state began to increase in the late summer, we saw a sudden surge in positive cases at Union Grove. Because of the effect of COVID-19 on staffing levels, DVA requested USDVA staffing support, which was provided under the Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS) program, which provides staff up to 30 days. Twelve USDVA staff were provided to Union Grove for 30 days. The DVA is able to cover its 25% cost share with federal CARES Act funds already received. The Veterans Homes at King and Chippewa Falls have at different times requested USDVA staffing support – King was provided staff (the duration was extended to 60 days); Chippewa Falls' need was determined to be extremely low and was not fulfilled.

The Wisconsin Veterans Homes have received \$6 million in supplemental funding to help defray the additional costs associated with responding to COVID-19: HHS Provider Relief of \$3.1 million; State CARES funds of \$1.7 million; and federal Infection Control funding of \$1.2 million. All told, these funds assist all three campuses with maintaining sufficient stocks of PPE for staff and members, aggressively testing for COVID-19 – our homes have completed well over 23,000 COVID-19 tests of staff and members – sanitizing equipment, additional personnel costs, and technology that facilitates virtual visits between members and their loved ones.

As to your goal “to help stop the outbreak and provide information to prevent future outbreaks from occurring at other facilities in Wisconsin and around the country,” your voice to encourage the seemingly invulnerable to observe the recommendations of public health professionals – staying home, practicing social distancing, limiting gatherings, wearing a mask, and washing hands frequently – will ultimately help protect those most vulnerable, many of them the heroes who reside within the Wisconsin Veterans Homes.

We eagerly anticipate the day we can again safely gather with family and friends; until we can safely do so, many of the mitigation steps are easy to practice and will help protect those who work in our Veterans Homes and other nursing homes and healthcare facilities. If you are interested in further discussing your concerns and learning more about our Wisconsin Veterans Homes, your staff may schedule a virtual meeting with me by calling my office at 608-266-1315.

Sincerely,



Mary M. Kolar
Secretary